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‘Beyond Individualism: Social Work and Social Identity’

Individualism continues to have a notable impact on social work. The personalisation of services and the individualisation of care are just two examples of this societal trend. While helping service users to articulate their aspirations for a better future, individualism, if taken too far, undermines the social aspects of life. In response to this concern, this paper argues that social work must appreciate the interplay between the individual and the collective spheres, and its impact on identity formation, in order to enhance human well-being. To give substance to this argument, Jenkins’ model of social identity is appropriated and augmented to take account of four interlinked, yet distinct, orders of experience, namely: the individual, interactional, institutional and societal orders. This reworked conceptualisation is then considered in terms of its implications for social work practice.

Key words: individualism, identity, personalisation, social theory

Introduction

In western nations, there is a resurgence of *individualism* (Roulstone & Morgan, 2009; Dowse, 2009; Mooney & Neal, 2010; Wiklund, 2010; Dodd, 2013). This trend refers to the rights, freedoms and general salience of the individual in modern society. It stems from a neo-liberal order valorising autonomous citizens who participate fully in the market. What is more, it suggests that people, as agents, are no longer bound by traditional, cultural mores, immutable relationships and predictable, solid routines. Instead, they are encouraged to embrace a state of being where personal psycho-biographies are refashioned according to the vagaries and eddies of modern life; the opportunities afforded by digital technology and social media; and relentless consumption.

Many domains of our being - psychological, social, institutional, cultural and economic - are embroiled in these changes. The new individualism is as much a part of the private sphere as the corporate order (Elliot, 2013). Thus, it is enmeshed in the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’. Because social work operates in the domain of the ‘social’, that interstice between the State and the informal sphere of family and community, it both reacts to, and perpetuates the new individualism (Ferguson, 2012). Top down imperatives, in the form of social policy directives, and bottom up currents, in the shape of communal movements and voices, meld to reproduce individualism as a *force majeure*.

Even when neo-liberal, neo-conservative, political pundits talk about the need for the ‘big society’ (Cameron, 2010), in reality this masks an unrelenting, economic individualism – one leading to the ‘sink or swim’ society. In what some commentators view as ‘broken Britain’, the strategic direction for welfare services appears to be founded on an ‘unholy trinity’ of regulative concepts, namely: individualism, responsibility and social order (Mooney & Neal, 2010). Unsurprisingly, this bandwagon has corrosive effects. As Scharff surmises (2011), the

contemporary emphasis on individualism has created the view that structural inequalities can be reduced to individual fecklessness and lassitude. Furthermore, it is contended, individuals can achieve their aspirations through self-efficacy and self-belief; it is only the dissolute who fail. In this dispensation, moral identities are predicated on success in corporate life.

In this paper, I argue there has been a reawakening of individualism in social policy and social work practice. While it has produced some positives for the service user, the more negative side referred to above, is also evident. For example, the much vaunted strengths perspective in social work has philosophical roots lying in humanistic individualism. It synergises readily with contemporary neoliberalism yet runs the risk of obfuscating structural inequalities (Gray, 2011). Moreover, the 'enforced individualism' with the personalisation movement might have the effect of impeding social justice rather than promoting it (Ferguson, 2012).

All in all, we are at a stage when the 'social' and 'relational' in social work are being eclipsed by a move towards the free-standing agent. I make this case by showing how the new individualism has taken hold at a societal level leading to gains and losses for actors. More than that, I contend it has impacted on social work: a profession mandated to focus on the interplay between the 'individual' and the 'social'. The work of Richard Jenkins (2004; 2008; 2010) is drawn upon here, and reworked, to provide a unified, analytical framework for examining the connection between the individual, social identity and social work.

The Rise of Individualism in (Late)Modern Life

A number of contemporary, sociological thinkers have explored the rise of individualism in modern life, connecting it with different ideas about the person and society. For Anthony Giddens (2004) contemporary conditions potentiate the actor's reflexivity and promulgate a creative capacity to shape the self. Thus, the actor's ability to think, formulate meaning and act in an authorial, as opposed to a socially determined way, becomes intrinsic to human agency and the constitution of society. Reflexivity entails a process of constant self-monitoring, reflecting on social circumstances and cogitating about the other's intentions. In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (2002), Giddens applies his thesis to the private domain of sexuality, intimate relationships and the family. Here, the actor's romantic life becomes a project within which to invest as traditional cultural and religious mores decline. Moreover, this is a process of existential rumination on the nature of personhood and the personal narratives which permeate it.

Ulrich Beck (2000), an intellectual associate of Giddens, has a somewhat similar view of this process which he terms *reflexive modernization*. For Beck, the knowledge arising from human reflection is not tangential to social life; rather, it is constitutive of what we do and take for granted. Although Beck supports Giddens' treatise, he views reflexivity in a more

expansive way. Centrally, the awareness of risk in modern society plays a formative role in shaping our identities. Yet, modernisation is not only about the dangers associated with risk; it also opens up possibilities for greater choice, for the occurrence of an appreciable sense of individualism.

The capacity to monitor risk is linked with human agency and sticks to it like chewing gum to a shoe. Such agency is fundamental to reflexive modernisation where more and more arenas of social life, that had previously been sequestered, are opened up for inspection. Hence, the public, private and intimate aspects of our being are freed from the bind of tradition, only to be re-fashioned or re-invented. Freedom here means what we do with what has been done to us. Reflection in this context is witnessed in the application of reason, deliberation, choice, experimentation and resistance to the taken-for-granted. All of these creative faculties take place in the context of uncertainty and contingency. The positive ring of individualism in this creative vein tackles essentialist positions on gender and age-related roles, illuminates the corporeal domain of life, and expands opportunities for emotional expressiveness.

If Giddens and Beck send out a number of positive messages about individualism in society, then it is important to register the misgivings of other social theorists about this social phenomenon. Zygmunt Bauman (2000; 2006), for instance, suggests modern society is best captured through the notion of 'liquidity'. By this he means that society, like a liquid, has undergone great changes in its constitution. Social structures that were once fixed or perhaps even brittle, are now much more fluid, labile and prone to alteration. Time has become instantaneous and space more malleable in the 'so called' liquid society.

Not only does a sense of liquidity reshape social institutions but it also moulds social lives. Liquid life becomes noted for its precariousness, its uncertainty, the great pace and change of events which interlace personal biographies. From another angle it can be seen as inaugurating new beginnings where we are encouraged to 'feel the fear and do it anyway' (Jeffers, 2007). Importantly, identity becomes privatised, fractured and frail as individuals are disembedded from their social moorings. Rather than identity being fixed, it is now a project of work, a performative responsibility as Judith Butler frames it (2006), a 'do-it-yourself' challenge that splices together short-term aims none of which cohere into a linear, homogeneous experience. We no longer 'have' an identity; instead we 'do' identity as part of an everyday, skilled accomplishment.

Yet, with these unprecedented changes, and the dissolution of wider social bonds, the individual comes to feel less secure and more ontologically vulnerable. Identity suffers with the pressures to be adaptive and malleable. Moreover, the fleeting, provisional nature of the modern social encounter is fuelled by the consumerist market which puts its stamp on individualism. This juxtaposition of (turbo) capitalism 'cheek-by-jowl' with individualism becomes a toxic brew as individuals look for commercial solutions to personal, relationship-

based issues (Lasch, 1980). Thus, contemporary selfhood under consumer neoliberalism has become increasingly asocial and bound up with narcissistic quests for self-enhancement at the expense of emotional depth in human relationship. In this context, Richard Sennett (1998) refers to the corrosion and destabilization of character in modern-day, global capitalism.

Bauman's concerns are further echoed, to some degree, in the work of Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert (2009). In the opinion of these authors, individualism is linked with the pervasive impact of globalisation. In effect, globalised consumerism demands that individuals reshape their lives, continuously, at various levels: domestic, sexual, psychological, and corporeal. Our culture places an onus on instant gratification, short-termism, immediate results and self-invention. Tellingly, for Elliott and Lemert, this focus on exigency has pathologising effects. In the workplace, this is revealed in how workers are treated as dispensable commodities creating an ambient fear of expendability. Thus, they are recast as entrepreneurial innovators and pressurised to become 'movers and shakers' or else face the ignominy of being yesterday's people.

While this may feel like riding on a juggernaut, to appropriate Giddens' metaphor, with its unstoppable momentum, the evanescent quality of the experience has led many people to experience a debilitating uncertainty. With the freedom to choose one's lifestyle and identity comes ontological anxiety (Honneth, 2010). In effect, the burden of narcissistic choice becomes unbearable. Instead of finding ourselves, say Elliott and Lemert sagaciously, we lose ourselves. Or, in the stark words of Axel Honneth (2004):

Urged from all sides to show that they are open to authentic self-discovery and its impulses, there remains for individuals only the alternative of simulating authenticity or of fleeing into full blown depression, of staging personal originality for strategic reasons or of pathologically shutting down (p. 475).

What is more, in the (late)modern world, our emerging sense of self is more open to censure, scrutiny and evaluation from others around us, bringing with it a much greater susceptibility to stress and status-anxiety. Social, evaluative threats create the possibility of a loss of self-esteem (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and that ubiquitous sense of shame which Thomas Scheff (2010) has dubbed the master, social emotion in modern day life.

Not only that, the refusal to transcend the 'I' into the 'we', that comes with a self-centred individualism, can lead to various pathologies such as anomie, loneliness and depression (Ehrenberg, 1998); or the phenomenon of being an 'intimate stranger' or part of the 'lonely crowd' (Putnam, 2001). The problem, here, is not the barriers to self-realisation but rather viewing self-realisation itself as the only, master narrative. The attainment of freedom, in its fullest sense, necessitates that a person not only aspires to individual rights for himself or herself but sees the 'other' as having rights as well. This was Hegel's critical argument in his work, *Philosophy of the Right* (1952). In this

philosophical perspective the 'I' finds its most noble sense of freedom when it embraces sociality unequivocally. Self-realisation, according to Hegel, comes from the engagement in shared projects and connections made through the family and civil society.

Individualism in Social Work

Individualism permeates social work and social care through: (a) person-centred models of counselling (Miller, 2011) (b) person-centred planning with children and adults with a learning disability (Graham, 2010; Windley & Chapman, 2010) (c) the personalisation of services (Sunders, 2010; Welch & Fernandes, 2010; Williamson, 2010; Taylor and Morris, 2011; SCIE, 2011;) and (d) the promotion of 'life politics' (Ferguson, 2008; 2012). Let us briefly examine each of these modalities.

Person-centred models of counselling embrace the spirit of individualism with gusto and are given leverage by the current emphasis, in social policy, on improving access to psychological therapies. The continuing interest in Gerard Egan's (2009) counselling model is a case in point. In stage one the client's present scenario is explored. This concerns the individual's biographical story, how it may conceal various blind spots (or gaps in understanding) and how unidentified opportunities for growth may be realised as a consequence. In stage two, the narrative is extended to outline the individual's preferred scenario: how life, as a part of a process of wish fulfilment, might be better defined to meet one's goals. This entails creating agendas for change that involve choice and commitment. In the final stage of the model, practical strategies are formulated to address the person's preferred scenarios. The instrumental nature of the method materialises at this point as the individual brainstorms various options for meeting his life outcomes and shapes them into a workable plan.

Person-centred planning shares many of the features identified in Egan's model. It is a structured, imaginative process for enabling a person with a learning disability, a child in the care system, or someone who is generally disempowered for whatever reason, to make plans for her future. This model rightly aims to empower and challenges stances embracing a medicalised or paternalistic approach to a service user's needs. In doing so, it attempts to place the individual at the centre of decision-making, recognising and valuing her gifts, capacities and strengths rather than falling into a myopic language of deficits. Through a range of creative methods individuals are exhorted to exercise choice, independence and plan for 'alternative tomorrows'. Human agency is supported rather than objectifying the service user by contorting her needs into pre-formed schemes and services.

However, the humanistic language of 'becoming a person' can be deconstructed sociologically to reveal deeper insights. Nickolas Rose (1998, 2003), for instance, suggests counselling activities, such as the one described, can sometimes inadvertently lead individuals into an examination of their own self-conduct, and, as a consequence, implicate

the self with oppressive social structures. For Rose, this is about certificating modes of conduct, inscribing the individual in multiple nodes of power and providing the means by which human subjectivity enters the calculations of the authorities. Such a view provides a cautionary reminder that no action is free from structural influences nor the influence of governmental discourse.

The personalisation of services is a fairly recent social policy initiative drawing on discourses in the disability movement (Lymbery, 2012). It was designed with the aim of ensuring service users would have choice and control over the type of support delivered to meet their assessed needs. Furthermore, it was constructed to have the added effect of enabling citizens to lead the lives they wished to live, being assured the services delivered to them were of high quality and expressed respect for their independence and dignity (Sanderson & Lewis, 2012). As I () have said elsewhere:

‘through the medium of personalization, service users take more responsibility for their problems, implement their own solutions and manage the accruing risk. Social workers, in this modernised form of ‘active welfare’ are individualised quasi-marketers whose role is to broker and advocate’ (p.).

Dean’s (2003) metaphor of the chess game is apposite here. Welfare providers become the enterprising knaves while welfare recipients, no longer to be cast as passive pawns, are now upgraded to autonomous monarchs. In this role they become active co-producers of services. Prudentialism and entrepreneurism mark out personalisation as a form of individualism flourishing under neo-liberalism. Its encouragement of self-governance, moreover, makes it emblematic of a *technology of care* where the aim is to control populations indirectly by making individuals responsible for their own well-being, health, self-esteem, ethical conduct, risk profile, and adherence to societal norms (Rose, 1998). In furthering such areas Dodd (2013) argues personalisation privileges individualism over structural difference and unequal stratification, thus frustrating the politics of disablement.

Harry Ferguson (2001, 2012) has made a concerted argument for a social work oriented towards ‘life politics’. He has embraced the ideas of Giddens and Beck to argue that social work, in a period of late modernity, must promote a reflexive, personalised awareness. Such a change of emphasis from a social work embroiled in a traditional emancipatory politics, suggests it should engage with key societal processes including individualisation, the new intimacy in the private sphere, and the deepening of reflexivity.

In Ferguson’s estimation, these changes mean social work, viewed through the lens of life politics, should engage in a new methodology of life planning for late-modern citizens whereby they are helped to gain mastery over their lives, and articulate their aspirations for healing experiences. He (2001) states:

‘social work education and practice need to develop an orientation which fully understands individualisation processes, the new intimacy, reflexivity and choices open to consumers of services and to respond accordingly. Social workers need to be as skilled in how to develop nurturing relationships with clients that promote self-actualisation, mastery and healing as they are in practising emancipatory politics through an anti-oppressive approach’ (p. 53).

Interestingly, Ferguson (2008) has also adopted aspects of Bauman’s thesis on the liquid society in relation to social work practice. Here, the seemingly solid, static and sedentarist nature of social work is challenged. In its place, he argues modern day practice inclines more towards a mobile, flowing form of activity in arenas such as the office, the car journey and the home visit. A focus on corporeality creeps into the thesis when the heart of the experience is seen to lie in the sensual body of the practitioner.

Let us pause, at this juncture, to reflect more critically on individualism in social work. Although it is clear Ferguson is not abandoning emancipatory social work, his rendering of the relationship between it and ‘life politics’ is less transparent (Garrett, 2003). More specifically, the connection between the individual’s life-biography, and the social orders that continue to ensnare it through stratified, unequal patterns of class, racial, religious and gendered affiliations, needs greater theoretical attention. This view also applies to person-centred approaches and the social policy of personalisation described above.

Moreover, while Ferguson is right to highlight the positive benefits for service users of reversing the former sequestration of existential issues (such as death, divorce and sexual expression), the negative ramifications of this move, if taken too far, also need more detailed examination. In other words, service users might find the new found responsibility for their existential life projects too threatening and unbearable if insufficient consideration is given to the impact of social networks, institutions and social structures on their social selves.

One’s identity is not a separate entity (carried out in the private theatre of the mind) as individualism might presuppose. Rather, it is imbricated with, and adjusts to, the social spheres around it. Essentially, a social work that adopts person-centred models or life-politics must be set within a broader, ontological canvass of *social* identity, if it is to link credibly with human emancipation and positive self-realisation. The central problem is that individualism supports a Cartesian view of the self as solitary and disconnected from the world around it. This is the myth of the self-contained individual that Norbert Elias critiqued in his essay, *Homo Clauses* (1978) denounced in his genealogical investigations. It sets up an atomistic edifice subverting identity as opposed to one enriching a sense of our inter-being.

Towards a Unified Framework for Social Identity

Richard Jenkins (2008) sets out an informed, sociological framework for understanding the nature of human identity. His core contention suggests this most personal, yet social, of constructs lies at the hub of our experience in the modern world shaping indelibly our perceptions of people and events, and how we react internally or externally to them. Identity, for Jenkins, primarily involves a sense of *similarity* with others (what can be termed a collective sense of identity) and *difference* from them (what can be viewed as our uniqueness). For some, it represents the apotheosis of positive identification with an ethno-religious group; for others, the nadir of painfully, shy introspection. Whatever form it takes, it 'is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us) (Jenkins, 2004, p. 5).

Drawing heavily on the work of Erving Goffman, Jenkins (2010) posits that identity, whether in its individual or collective expression, must be understood in the context of three distinct, yet interconnected, analytical orders of existence which operate co-terminously in the social world (see Figure 1 below). These orders provide a heuristic template for understanding the formation, allocation and assertion of social identities.

PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE

The individual order is the domain of the embodied person and her internal, phenomenological experience of the world. Prosaically put, it is the 'thinking that goes on in one's head'. However, this thinking is shaped to a significant degree by the individual's perception of what others are thinking about her. 'Individual identity – embodied in selfhood – is not a meaningful proposition in isolation from the human world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed' (Jenkins, p. 18). This interplay between internal and external identification resonates with George Herbert Mead's (1934) idea of the interchange between the 'me' (the internalised attitudes emanating society) and the 'I' (the private response to the 'me').

The interactional order, by way of contrast, deals with symbolic interaction between self with others. Thus, friends meet and greet one another informally whereas a business transaction between an employer and employee gives rise to a more formal exchange of views. According to Jenkins, interaction provides an important source of mutual recognition and validation in each of these differing contexts for identity formation is never a unilateral process. The give and take of communication, the need to establish understanding and consensus, indicates this order is structured. Deviations from normal expressions may well be noted or perhaps experienced with a degree of embarrassment. Drawing on Goffman again, Jenkins views this order as the arena of impression management and 'saving face'.

The institutional order, lastly, refers to the realm of the social group and its impact on identity. Some groups in which we participate, according to Jenkins, are ascribed an identity by external sources, by the so-called 'eye of the beholder'; other groups, conversely, give their participants an identity. Formal institutions such as workplaces, schools, bureaucratic organisations, hospitals, and prisons are representative of the former; that is, individuals are allocated (often) essentialist positions, roles and tasks. For all that, struggles take place within these sites as revealed in the way informal groups resist bureaucratic control. Again, to return to Goffman's research (1934), inmates in restrictive, total institutions or asylums found subtle ways of thwarting official rules so that, at least, a tincture of internal identity-formation could be controlled.

Jenkins' construction of these different orders of human life, and his notion of the interplay between the individual and the collective, provides a helpful, unified framework for transcending individualism in social work, and for valorizing the idea that identity is socially constructed. However, to enhance its explanatory potential, the framework's understanding of the human world requires some reconstruction. More specifically, what is of concern, is Jenkins' lack of explicit attention to the impact of wider society, not just its institutions, on identity formation. Society itself should be seen as a macro domain, or order, *sui generis* (Layder, 2006), with its own distinct properties that affect the individual, interaction and institution orders. To accommodate this perception I have added a fourth order, namely the *societal order*, to enhance Jenkins' framework (see Figure 2 below).

PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE

Following Derek Layder (2006) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the societal order is seen as a sphere where human subjects face an inequitable allocation of various types of capital (or resources). Hence, cultural, material and authoritative capital is distributed unevenly according to gender, class, and racial stratifications with increases in societal inequality having egregious implications for everyone's well-being, not just the dispossessed and disaffected (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Tellingly, for a growing underclass, inequality affects identity in a negative manner by inducing stigma, shame, status-anxiety, stress and frustration when opportunities for achieving desired ends are thwarted. It is also important to state at this juncture that power, domination, ideology and vested interests underpin the various forms of social stratification and inequality expressed on a society-wide basis. These mechanisms serve to legitimise identities in the hierarchies defined by wealth and social status.

Social Work and Social Identity

Person-centred interventions have a vital role in building a meaningful and fulfilled identity. The opening up of existential issues, the definition of hopes and dreams, and the delegation of responsibility for well-being and welfare, demonstrate a humanistic concern for the

individual, and one that acknowledges active personhood. Such approaches create what Martin Buber (1937) referred to as an 'I-Thou', as opposed to an 'I-It', relationship whereby the person is viewed as a subject rather than an object.

That said, a restrictive individualism does not capture the nuances of social identity highlighted earlier; nor does it satisfactorily recognise the interplay between the individual and the social group, that Jenkins helpfully articulates. In short, it must be seen as a partial stance. Furthermore, without fully embracing the social nature of identity, it is in danger of reproducing and reinforcing the societal pathologies outlined earlier. Personalisation in social work might fall into this trap if it is not supported by a fully developed social ontology of the person: an ontology which weds personalisation with helping relationships (Sowerby, 2010). Social work must recognise and respond to the multi-layered nature of social identity.

Social Work and the Individual Order

Social work within the individual order should embrace the kind of individualistic approaches charted above but in a manner that recognises the dialectic between the inner and outer worlds of identity. If the service user's image of herself results from an internal conversation between the 'I' and the 'me', to reference Mead again, then the social worker must appraise sensitively this existential dynamic. Cooley's portrayal of the 'looking glass self' is another way of capturing this inter-change and provides a master, sensitising concept for tuning-in to a person's identity needs.

Adopting these insights, the social worker must foster the right conditions to make this internal conversation flourish. Put in another way, if the 'me' of the service user's social identity reacts to the responses of the outside world, then social workers must create conditions in which the individual is recognised in a positive way. Experiences of misrecognition violate the 'self'. For Axel Honneth (2007) recognition, in its fullest sense, must be expressed in three different ways, namely through: (a) care (b) respect (of one's rights) and (c) an acknowledgement of one's contribution to social life and the community. In order to embrace fully a paradigm based on recognition social workers must be phenomenologically oriented; that is, they must listen to the service user bracketing preconceptions to arrive at the quintessence of her inner thinking. This is an important precondition for accurate empathy.

Moreover, a phenomenological understanding of inner thinking is required to apprehend the significance of stigma. According to Goffman, stigma can lead to a spoiled identity. Similarly, in Jenkins' thinking, stigma represents a situation where difference, rather than similarity, is to the fore; or where idealised expectations are perceived to have been breached. In this connection, social work must also be sensitive to the *shame* accompanying a sense of difference. Shame is the outcome of problematic social bonds

whereas pride in one's identity follows positive social encounters. Social work should aim to foster pride and also the ventilation of shame for, if left unrecognised, it can lead to anger, withdrawal and the dissolution of social bonds.

Social Work and the Interaction Order

As indicated above, the interaction order is the sphere of the face-to-face. It is where relationships are formed and sustained over time. For social workers, their engagement in relationship is not just about appropriating a non-directive style. In many situations, relationship in social work is the conduit for giving information, rapport building, challenging perspectives, allowing a measure of dependency, and acting as a therapeutic container. In this context, Ruch et al. (2010) have made a convincing case for relationship-based social work reflecting the accumulated wisdom of psycho-social and object-relations models of practice. Such models have an important role in illuminating the interaction order.

Furthermore, the interaction order is the zone where a number of inviolable, social rules shape action. Thus, daily face-to-face work is constrained by temporal and spatial necessities. It is highly attuned to bodily idioms. The right degree of attention to the service user is required. The impressions professionals transmit, and how they are received and interpreted by service users, must be reflexively appraised. A prolonged stare often suggests negative judgement while lack of eye contact might infer disinterest. Professionals must also understand that service users, too, are conveying impressions that can be misinterpreted. Deference might need to be shown in some circumstances. Its absence can lead to embarrassment. What is more, the salience of the face, and 'saving face', should not be underestimated. Finally, a regard for the fragility of the interaction order is vital. One's sense of well-being is ostensibly as good as the quality of the last interaction with a significant another. Repairing relational breakdown and restoring relational attunement and harmony must take precedence in day-to-day social work.

In all of this, the self is sensitive, context-dependent, processual and contingent. It is very susceptible to external labels which can then be internalised. Furthermore, social workers must understand the fundamental importance of the dialectic between the service user's internal and external worlds and how it impacts on self-definition. Equally important, they must appreciate, reflexively, how this dialectic operates to shape their own thinking and the way they *frame* their practice. In Anglophile countries, bureaucratic, forensic, risk-oriented and informational frames are evident to some extent in statutory social work and sometimes work against the interaction order.

Social Work and the Institutional Order

Service users come together in a range of institutions and groups including prisons, hospitals, schools, residential homes and community associations. It is imperative their individual and group identities are enhanced in these settings given what we know about

past assaults on the self as conveyed in the findings of critical abuse inquiries but also Goffman and Foucault's work on the institution with its panoptical gaze.

In a related vein, Jenkins (2008) suggests group identities can be ascribed from the outside by powerful caretakers and authorities (sometimes applying stereotypical categories), yet in other situations they are open to the group's own definition. He references Karl Marx's distinction between a class 'in itself' and a class 'for itself'. The former depicts a mass of individuals in roughly the same social position who have been categorised by external sources as having common characteristics. The latter reflects a class that has become conscious of its own group identity, has realised its common interests and has mobilised to defend them. If social work is to take empowerment seriously, then it must strive to facilitate the latter form of identification, one which is not imposed externally but rather self-generated by service users themselves.

Two empowerment-led methods are offered here as brief illustrative examples of how a group 'for itself' identification can be facilitated by social workers. The first is self-directed groupwork (Mullender & Ward, 1991). In this method social workers work alongside service users enabling them to have an important say in the definition of their own needs, interests, aspirations and group identity. The role of the social worker is to offer guidance and support in the initial stages of the group's development; thereafter, the group increasingly take on responsibility for their own momentum, activity, and ostensible radicalisation.

The second method is exemplified in Augusto Boal's (2000) model of emancipatory drama, or image theatre, with oppressed groups. Here, a facilitator introduces drama techniques to the participants so they can create corporeal representations of oppressive situations but also identify problem-solving strategies. These techniques foster a sense of social identity and community membership that depends on the 'symbolic construction and signification of a mask of similarity which all can wear, an umbrella of solidarity under which all can shelter' (Jenkins, 2008, p. 110). The corporeal aspect of the technique fits with Jenkins' idea that identity is essentially embodied. The body represents continuity of experience, 'an index of collective similarity and differentiation, and a canvas upon which identification can play' (Jenkins, p. 19).

Social Work and the Societal Order

As indicated earlier, I have approached the societal order in terms of its unequal distribution of various kinds of capital. This distribution often depends on signifiers such as gender, age and class. Social workers can gain a more detailed understanding of how this process works through the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). In this context, Paul Michael Garrett (2012) has outlined a model of Bourdieusian social work that problematises individualism in social work and the impact, more generally, of neo-liberalism on the profession.

For Garrett, social workers should be attuned to Bourdieu's rich conceptual arsenal of *habitus* (durable schemes of thought and action that have been internalised by the actor through socialisation), *field* (the structured, rule-bound locations in which actors take part) and *capital* (the resources that have been acquired by or afforded to actors). The attainment of capital, or not as the case may be, within the societal order is given greater expository weight when considered in the light of both habitus and field. Put in another way, the juxtaposition of all three heuristics explains how disadvantage occurs but also change, for actors can make virtuosic choices (to some degree) to better their social positions. Importantly, this analytical triad links the subjective nature of social life (of which individual identity is a part) with its objective counterpart (that is, societal structure).

Service users will enter transactions with social workers with a pre-defined habitus, one that has been shaped by their surrounding fields and the amount of capital available to them. Social workers, too, enter encounters with service users with a socially induced habitus. To theorise anti-oppressive practice from a Bourdieusian perspective entails a reflexive understanding of this unique interplay: tuning into the service user's habitus but also one's own as a social worker and how they are both linked to the subjective and objective dimensions of social life. Such an understanding is emancipatory in the sense it helps social workers to map out, empathically, the disabling fields affecting service users' habitus and their (non)access to capital. In addition, it problematises an overzealous individualism in social work by illuminating the fact that identity formation involves both an individual and social process and one that is fraught because of its inherent subjugation of some groupings in society.

Conclusion

Our identity is a product of internalised reflections that are insuperably shaped by significant others and the outside world. To step aside from this ontological position is to risk the miasma of extreme individualism which, although championing existential choice, has the potential of accentuating the individual's experience of *angst*. A moderate form of individualism in social work has its place, as I have argued, but not if it becomes a totalising discourse, one emasculating the role of the collective. In this paper I considered a number of expressions of individualism in social work focusing critically on person-centred models of counselling, the personalisation movement, person-centred planning and the engagement with 'life politics'. There are other expressions not covered such as how individualism marries with: (a) strengths-based social work (b) the growing interest in spirituality (c) quality of life debates and (d) solution-focused approaches. In this context, Richard's Jenkins' model of social identity, which I have augmented, provides a unified, conceptual framework for the profession at a time when we need to reinstate the 'social' within social work. In all of this, the profession must respond to the politics of social identity for the fact of being who we are is never a neutral affair. Through an understanding of the dynamics of

the individual, interactional, institutional and societal orders, social workers are better equipped to problematise identity-formation and thus enhance their sensitivity to identities that have suffered debasement. In the final analysis, social work's adherence to the time-honoured principle of self-determination is predicated on the realisation of *social-determination*.

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